September 2, 1990

11:00 Worship Service
for the Installation of The Reverend Barbara Dua

First Presbyterian Church
Greensboro, North Carolina

GOD'S OTHER PEOPLE

John M. Buchanan, Pastor
Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, Illinois

Scripture
Mark 1:40-2:6, 13-17
Genesis 16:1-16

It is very good to be part of this community of faith on this significant morning and I bring you greetings from the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago. I have known about this important church for years and until this weekend I have known your pastor by the fine reputation he enjoys in the Presbyterian family. It has been a delight to get to know him personally, to break bread with your staff and to hear from them about the excitement and love and faith which is part of this time at this church. This is a great church. It looks like it, feels like it, worships and sings like it, serves like it, makes creative and strong decisions about its professional staff, so it is. Which brings me to your decision to call The Reverend Barbara Dua to be an Associate Pastor. Congratulations on that decision. She and I have been colleagues and friends for a decade. She's bright and creative and hard working. You know all that, of course. I love the thought of Barbara Dua and her strong gifts for ministry working in this great congregation and I pray God's blessing, God's stimulating impatience, and on occasion, God's peace for her and you.

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My sermon on this occasion grows out of a peculiar vignette which occurs almost at the beginning of the Biblical story. It's a curious little tale. It's a kind of small human interest story happening in the middle of the bigger story, the real story.

It occurred to me as I thought about this story that you could say that about each of us: small, relatively insignificant episodes in a larger story. First Presbyterian Church, Greensboro, North Carolina, a pretty big church, but part of the larger story of Presbyterianism in North America; a small episode in the Christian enterprise. Barbara Dua, part of

and hugging. It's a festive ecclesiastical occasion, but it was not designed with the sixty-minute imperative in mind. So I didn't tell Barbara and Jerry Shetler that I wanted you to hear Genesis 21 in addition to Genesis 16, and all that material in Mark, because I was afraid they might uninvite me. It's too late for that now, so here goes.

Sarah finally conceives, is ecstatic, has a baby - Isaac. Everybody is happy. Until one day Sarah sees her infant son Isaac playing with Hagar's son Ishmael, and she begins to think about the fact that while she and Abraham have this wonderful son, Isaac, Abraham and Hagar have a wonderful son too, a son older than Isaac. And suddenly Hagar who tried to run away once, is absolutely unwelcome, unwanted. Sarah wants her and her baby out of there, out of her life, out of Abraham's life, out of the story. Insiders become instant outsiders. And then there occurs a scene of enormous power and passion. Listen to it:

> **"So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba. When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then she went, and sat down over against him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, 'Let me not look upon the death of the child.' And as she sat over against him, the child lifted up his voice and wept. And God heard the voice of the lad; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, 'What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not; for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him fast with your hand; for I will make him a great nation.' Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water; and she went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the lad a drink. And God was with the lad, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow."**
> [Genesis 21:14-20]

Hagar and Ishmael are, in terms of the big story, frankly, disposable. The appearance of Isaac renders them instantly irrelevant. The big story can proceed now. Abraham and Sarah have an heir. The chosen people, the promised land, the law, the temple, the Kingdom...

It's now a matter of the major plot playing itself out. One modern Biblical scholar observed that it's almost as if the Bible is arguing with itself in this story. The tradition wants to get rid of Hagar and her son and get on with the main plot and right in the middle of a very human scheme to do just that, right at that excruciating moment when the baby is going to die of thirst and exposure, and his mother is so utterly overcome with her powerlessness, and the senselessness and injustice of it all - so overcome she actually walks away from her child so she will not have to watch - it is then that God hears that weak infant cry and knows that woman's desperate agony and rage: hears it and knows and responds to it and comes and saves and empowers and promises life. That's some story.

AIDS, for homeless men and women and children in your city and mine, for women like the client of the shelter who broke her leg last winter and who would not allow the cast to be removed and who ultimately had to be physically restrained in order to remove the cast because, the caseworker reported, it was hers and she wasn't about to let it go. God loves them. God loves them when nobody else does.

Garrison Keillor tells about walking into an Episcopal Church in Manhattan. He first attended an Episcopal Church in Copenhagen he said because they used English and back in Minnesota, in the Plymouth Brethern Church of his childhood they used English "just like the Lord and his disciples." He was not prepared to like the formality, the kneeling and bowing and incense. "Our picture of Episcopalians," he said, "was wealthy people, Yale graduates, worshipping God in extremely good taste." Episcopalian was the church in wingtips, the church of scotch and soda. But in the Episcopal church in Manhattan, "I was surprised to see no suits. Nobody was well dressed. A congregation of a hundred souls, no parking lot, in need of paint and evidence of rain damage, but which managed to operate a soup kitchen that fed a thousand New Yorkers every day. Black faces in the sanctuary, old people, exiles from the Midwest, the lame and the halt, divorced ladies, gay couples: a real good anthology of the faith. I felt glad to be there... When we stood for prayers, it brought tears to your eyes." [We are Still Married, p. 206, 7]

The need to be inside, to belong, to be at home is real and powerful. It is, we now know, a primal need. The Freudians continue to tell us that an infant's basic need is acceptance and basic fear is rejection, exclusion. That truth about us never changes. Our basic need is for acceptance, our basic fear is of rejection. That fear can become the most powerful force in our lives. Advertising knows how powerful that is in all of us. Fashions are established not to make us distinct and unique, but to make us acceptable. The choice of attire, automobile, briefcase and beverage should be made for the purpose of establishing our acceptability - our discrimination.

A clever article in the July 30 edition of Fortune asked "How Much Does Class Matter?" and traced the unusual phenomenon of a diminishment of a sense of class in our culture but at the same time a kind of unprecedented search for social acceptability. A Philadelphia sociologist said: "This is a generation desperately yearning for class." Unprecedented numbers of Americans got rich in the 1980s. The number of registered polo players doubled in the decade, and the price of polo ponies consequently skyrocketed. You can, the article announced, hire a consultant to help you approach that ultimate arbitor of acceptability, The Social Register. The consultant will teach you manners, how to dress, style your hair, and see to it that you are invited to the correct and socially necessary cocktail parties and benefits." "It helps," one of them said, "if you can look like you just stepped off the Concorde."

It is devastating to be not wanted, not accepted, not included. And at a level so deep within us that we really don't have much access to it, we build defenses and buy insurance and invest our treasures and